

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Jean-François Vernay, *The Great Australian Novel: A Panorama* translated by Marie Ramsland (Brolga Publishing 2010)

New texts showcasing Australian literature within contemporary theoretical and contextual frameworks are long overdue, and new texts on the subject from an overseas academic are rare indeed! It was with much excitement, therefore, that I awaited my copy of *The Great Australian Novel*. At first glance Vernay's survey of Australian literature, or as he puts it, 'cinematic essay', appears to fit neatly with an upper high-school or undergraduate audience. There are some excellent inclusions, such as a short discussion on the iconic themes in Australian literature, a historical breakdown of publishing movements, a literary chronology, a listing of writer's birthdates, and a select bibliography of critical works.

Vernay skilfully divides historical periods of Australian literature into separate chapters for easy reference, and offers 'Close-ups' and 'Panoramic Views' of particular authors and works throughout the text. But a panoramic view cannot linger over details, and so it is with *The Great Australian Novel*; and while one does not expect deep analysis in a text with such an ambitious range, over-simplistic plot explanations take the place of critical analysis more often than is desirable in a book aimed at academia. While this may be an authorial choice – the book is easy to read and the information easy to digest – Vernay's attempt to cover almost two centuries of literary history suffers from the scope of the undertaking.

Some of Vernay's observations of Australian culture will not hold up to scrutiny. For example, 'It would seem that, ever since the birth of the Australian novel, equality existed since the book published after *Quintus Servinton was Woman's Love* (1832) by Mary Leman Grimstone' (25). Implying women writers in Australia had, or have, little difficulty finding an outlet for their work because the second book that was published in the colony had a female author is simply naïve. Vernay's appraisal of White's reception in Australia is equally disturbing:

When he [White] received the Nobel Prize in 1973, the year *The Eye of the Storm* was published, Patrick White became the living proof of the reputation Australian literature had established worldwide. But no man is a prophet in his own country and his case demonstrates how difficult it is to obtain recognition from one's peers in a country that supports mediocrity. So Australian writers have to aspire for international recognition without which they are not given a place of honour at home. (98-101)

To insist that Australians 'support mediocrity' because White has, at times, suffered less attention than his oeuvre deserves, suggests Vernay has perhaps been unfairly influenced by White's own attitude to the critical reception of his work within Australia.

A stronger editorial hand was required to make this book really shine. As it stands, it is peppered with the kind of mistakes that unfortunately render it problematic for students. His statement that Tim Winton's themes arise as 'a direct consequence of feeling marginalised, as with all those who live in Western Australia, his protagonists are uninformed individuals who grow up on the edge of society', suggests (incorrectly I hope) that all Western Australians are uninformed. Furthermore including Randolph Stow's *Merry go-round in the Sea* under the umbrella of POW fiction seems a rather sweeping inclusion;

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Sonya Hartnett's novel *Of a Boy* is the thirteenth she published not the first, and Christopher Koch's novel *The Year of Living Dangerously* was published in 1978 not 1972. The last is a strange mistake indeed for a scholar who wrote his dissertation on the literature of Koch. One is left to wonder how many of these mistakes may in fact be translation errors? Whatever the case, it is incredibly disappointing that the opportunity *The Great Australian Novel* presented has been lost.

Kathleen Steele